

Joseph Kau #67  
April 4, 1985

Q: Professor Kau, how old were you in 1941?

A: Five years old.

Q: Do you remember the Pearl Harbor attack at all?

A: I remember the morning... the Sunday morning. I remember hearing the church bells from St. Anthony's Catholic Church on Kalihi, just above the State Prison there. That was just prior, I believe, to the attack itself. The church bells used to ring on the hour. They used to ring church bells in those days, and it was after that the activity began, that I can recall.

Q: What do you remember of the attack?

A: The first thing I remember is looking at the skies toward Hickam, [John] Rogers Airport in Hickam [Field], and I remember seeing the area toward Pearl. I lived in lower Kalihi at the time. I remember seeing an aircraft, or something like that streaking smoke, smoking across the sky. I think I remember something of that sort. Either that or volumes of smoke coming up. This must have been after the church bells, sometime, I'd say 20 or 30 minutes after the hour.

Q: Were you at home at the time?

A: Yes, we were all at home. Then the other activity I recall are the airplanes, because you know those propeller driven planes were still a novelty then. The speed of the planes were quite impressive I always thought, and one in particular low flying plane, I remember, coming across the rooftop I think. Some of us climbed onto the roof, my brothers, some neighbors, the low tin roofs in these duplexes in lower Kalihi, to look up, and I seem to recall seeing a gunner, a tail gunner in an aircraft that flew the rooftops. There were only one or two that flew the rooftops. Then there was, I don't recall whether I saw it or someone mentioned it, an old Japanese man waving a flag, a Japanese flag. He was a store owner a block or so across from us.

Q: Could you see the Japanese insignias - the Rising Sun, on the planes?

A: I don't recall that, I just recall someone crouched I think it was Louie Nelson looking up, you could see someone crouched in the tail turret. That was it, but you could see the figure; later some said they saw the face... a Simian-looking monkey. We thought it was funny... someone there. I think others waved because you know, youngsters that didn't quite know what was going on, all the activities, and some waved at them. So... the

real news of it, the radio, (not everyone had radio in those days), I remember some kid coming down on a bicycle and shouting that the water had been poisoned. Later in the evening someone saying oh, there had been some paratroopers who had jumped in. So after that it was kind of chaotic I guess.

Q: What was the reaction of your family, your parents?

A: Some fear, because my mother had been in China during the 20's, during the War Lord period, right after the nationalists had gained control there, in the teens and the twenties. So for her, her response was apprehension, because she had lived through that in here childhood. So she was fearful that something like that might be occurring. But there wasn't anyplace to go, things to do; not much information. We weren't readers. My parents didn't read. No radio. So everything was... no telephones, or very few telephones. So most of it was by way of rumors and word of mouth.

Q: Must have been a pressure cooker for rumors.

A: Yes, all kinds of things, you know? I think it was, oh, I would say, well after, in mid-morning to late morning before people could really understand what all the fireworks were all about. And again, not too many people had cars in the neighborhood, so you know, it's not as though we could have gone our and found out. Those who had phones were calling about and I think I mentioned my uncle's neighbor had been killed by what they thought was a bomb that had been dropped in the area... oh where was that.... Beretania and Piikoi, that area there. So a friend of ours was killed with that incident. There were a few casualties there, so they thought they mistakenly bombed throughout an area that had smokestack the closest thing to an industry.

But there was quite a bit of... almost... not quite panic, but people were all about you know, out of the houses, looking about, not knowing what's going on. There was very little information for most of us, and for those of us who were preschoolers or youngsters, it was just a lot of activity.

Q: What do you remember of the days immediately following the attack; the early martial law period?

A: Not too much. Things... primarily the excitement of the people. This was something that... a great moment. I recall a period after that, seeing people keyed up to enlist, which was unusual. I can't recall whether it was the old armory, the old post office, or the old armory, which was where the Iolani Palace is, across the street from Iolani Palace on the Hotel Street. I can't recall whether it was there on King Street, the post office, or somewhere down toward Chinatown, there was a recruiting office, and people were keyed up, anxious to go and sign up and fight the dreaded enemy. I can recall that part.

Then for a while there, again the sense the people had for me; their senses of concern for me, in the sense that this was a

great deal out of the ordinary, learning that some friends, parents of friends, and people had been killed because of this activity... this attack. That's what was most striking.

But after two or three months, it was just back to the routine for a child going to kindergarten, then school. They began building bomb shelters I recall; a common feature up in the schools. That used to have these bomb shelters tunneled.

Q: What school did you go to?

A: This is Puuhale Elementary in lower Kalihi. So those were a new activity, and then of course there were gas mask drills and air raid drills...

Q: Were you given gas masks?

A: They were issued... I can't recall whether they were issued. I think we were all issued them? Or were they school issues? I can't recall. Perhaps we were all issued gas masks, and there was... in let's see that would be five years... till '43, '44, I remember drills. They used to use tear gas drills, and the kids would go and practice donning gas masks.

Q: What was the reaction of a kid, uh, you know, what was your reaction as a kid? Was there any conception of what poison gas was?

A: Not really. Mostly it was the tear gas because that was what the drill was run with. I remember tear gas canisters, they used to use as some tear gas generator, and that it was occasionally, maybe once every six months (once or twice a year), we'd go in to do the gas mask drill, and there'd be some evacuation drills. But you know there was nowhere to go except well the bomb shelters of course. By that time it gets to lessen their class day to go to the bomb shelters, that kind of thing.

Vegetable gardens, everybody grew vegetable gardens, and started cultivating; and even the schools, the grade schools used to have as a project (part of the curriculum) for some of us, which was planting and growing things.

Q: Do you recall any ethnic tensions in the neighborhood, with...

A: Japanese especially, yeah, because the mix there, in that neighborhood that I lived in was Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, mixed groups as well. But especially among the Japanese, the apprehension.... uh... but we'd been friends long enough so that even with that, I think people made the distinction between these outsiders... foreigners. It varied somewhat I think, people that had come from the "old country", who had, had hostilities, you know... racial hostilities, ethnic hostilities; the Chinese for example who had been in China recently, Japan, with Japan's incursions there, uh... in Manchuria and those areas. There typically were few. But this... I think the tendency was, well, it's typical, can't trust them, and so many of the local Japanese were "suspected". I think for

the youngsters, well you know, people I played with were Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, they were still people. I didn't identify them with this incursion. And then too, since I think we didn't actually see, you know, who the aggressor was, who these people attacking were... there was no occasion to identify the local Japanese with them; not in my mind anyway, and I'm counting a line of a lot of my playmates and friends.

Q: With the influx of servicemen into Hawaii, there must have been a... it must have had a big impact on the social fabric. Do you recall any of that?

A: Yeah, I remember there was a little GI camp just below the prison. The area of Nimitz Highway wasn't developed till during the War or right after the War. It wasn't built. So there was a... I don't know whether it was a holding camp, or a training camp, I used to be a newsboy selling papers there, and I remember GI's being there. I don't know exactly what the function of that was because there was a.... the closest installation would be Shafter. So I didn't know what the GI's were doing there. I just remember that. Let's see, that was in '42, '43, that period, they used it as a camp. But it changed the routine, the uniformed people, you know; we got the sense that we were at War.

There was some rationing of hard to get items, butter, meats were difficult to get.... communications, where my dad finally bought a radio that was a short wave potential that pulled a couple of tubes. That was the extent of it. Lights out, and curfew, I can't recall whether it was 8 or 9, with sirens to mark the curfew period. I recall that too. Those are the incursions. Some people were fearful you know, so they moved to the west coast. I remember that also, because they felt that there might be a recurrence of this attack. And the influx of GI's, what it did of course was liven up the activity with the... this was the jump off point for the South Pacific. That can be expected. So there were a lot of GI's especially in Honolulu town. So the activity, the incidents of GI's in uniform on leave, or on liberty on the weekend, there was much greater... much greater activity down in the red light area, around Iwilei and Chinatown.

Q: What do you recall of that?

A: Well, they had health stations to dispense... uh... that would have been somewhere around oh, Smith and Pauahi Street. My brothers were boot blacks (shoe shine boys). I used to run off to town to visit them at times and there was a lot of activity. The usual amount of hookers; some working on the old palace grounds there, because that's where they would take their tricks in the bushes there.

Q: On Iolani Palace grounds?

A: On Iolani Palace grounds. I'm you know, not a first-hand witness but so the boys told me. Uh, Ala Park, Ala Park was different then of course you know. It was kind of a ... well

just off Iwilei. Old Iwilei used to have some of the brothels I understand, there, and a friend of mine who said that above his father's hotel on the old River Street there, there were some brothels that were in operation. But there was a lot of activity down town. Since most of the GI's were mainland kids, they again, were seen as kind of outsiders. You know youngsters, to a child there was no identity factor there. And there was some sense that these were maybe Auslanders. For example, in lower Kalihi, there weren't too many white families that I can think of; maybe one of two white families around. So you know, to see wandering around in lower Kalihi would have been unusual during the 40's and late 30's. So when they did appear there was, well... kind of strangeness, sometimes some hostility, you know with kids that might be strolling around lost after a night out on the town. But it was a lively period, I think for a kid growing up in all this activity, without the eminent threat as you grow older, of what is going on; imminent threat of war.

Q: Well, do you have anything else you want to add to that?

A: No, it's just a kind of a part of growing up. I think what it has fixed in my mind, was the idea you know, that there had been an attack, um... that my impression was that War is an inevitable part of life. So you know, a few years later when the Korean War started up, you know the cycle of it all... um... and the whole idea I think, for a boy growing up, that it was an inevitable and a recurrent cycle to go trooping off to War. That was an inevitable part of history perhaps. Of course, as we get older we are perhaps disabused of that. But that sense, that it's part of the scheme of things.

Q: That's a very interesting perspective; to get the picture through the eyes of a small child like that. Thank you.